

Risk Factors of Child Abuse and Neglect

There is rarely a single cause of child abuse or neglect. Risk factors for child abuse and neglect include child-related factors, parent/caretaker-related factors, social-situational factors, family factors, and triggering situations. These factors frequently coexist.

Review the conditions that may lead to abuse and neglect. Then, put a check mark next to the issues present in the Meyers training case. Share your answers and any questions.

CHILD-RELATED FACTORS

- **Chronological age of child:** 50% of abused children are younger than 3 years old; 90% of children who die from abuse are younger than 1 year old; firstborn children are most vulnerable.
- **Mismatch** between child's temperament or behavior and parent's temperament or expectations
- **Physical or mental disabilities**
- **Attachment problems** or separation from parent during critical periods or reduced positive interaction between parent and child
- **Premature birth or illness at birth** can lead to financial stress, inability to bond, and parental feelings of guilt, failure, or inadequacy.
- **Unwanted child or child who reminds parent of absent partner or spouse**

PARENT/CARETAKER-RELATED FACTORS

- **Low self-esteem:** Neglectful parents often neglect themselves and see themselves as worthless people.
- **Abuse as a child:** Parents may repeat their own childhood experience if no intervention occurred in their case and no new or adaptive skills were learned.
- **Depression** may be related to brain chemistry and/or a result of having major problems and limited emotional resources to deal with them. Abusive and neglectful parents are often seen and considered by themselves and others to be terribly depressed people.
- **Impulsiveness:** Abusive parents often have a marked inability to channel anger or sexual feelings.
- **Substance abuse:** Drug and/or alcohol use serves as a temporary relief from insurmountable problems but, in fact, creates new and bigger problems.
- **Character disorder or psychiatric illness**
- **Ignorance of child development norms:** A parent may have unrealistic expectations of a child, such as expecting a 4-year-old to wash his/her own clothes.

- **Isolation:** Abusive and neglectful families may tend to avoid community contact and have few family ties to provide support. Distance from, or disintegration of, an extended family that traditionally played a significant role in child rearing may increase isolation.
- **Sense of entitlement:** Some people believe that it's acceptable to use violence to ensure a child's or partner's compliance.
- **Mental retardation or borderline mental functioning**

SOCIAL-SITUATIONAL FACTORS

- **Structural/economic factors:** The stress of poverty, unemployment, restricted mobility, and poor housing can be instrumental in a parent's ability to adequately care for a child. The child needs to be protected from separation from his/her family solely because of stressed economic conditions. Middle- and upper income parents may experience job or financial stress as well— abuse is not limited to families in poverty.
- **Values and norms** concerning violence and force, including domestic violence; acceptability of corporal punishment and of family violence
- **Devaluation of children and other dependents**
- **Overdrawn values of honor**, with intolerance of perceived disrespect
- **Unacceptable child-rearing practices** (e.g., genital mutilation of female children, father sexually initiating female children)
- **Cruelty in child-rearing practices** (e.g., putting hot peppers in child's mouth, depriving child of water, confining child to room for days, or taping mouth with duct tape for "back talk")
- **Institutional manifestations of inequalities and prejudice** in law, healthcare, education, the welfare system, sports, entertainment, etc.

FAMILY FACTORS

- **Domestic violence:** Children may be injured while trying to intervene to protect a battered parent or while in the arms or proximity of a parent being assaulted. Domestic violence can indicate one parent's inability to protect the child from another's abuse because the parent is also being abused.
- **Stepparent, or blended, families are at greater risk:** There is some indication that adult partners who are not the parents of the child are more likely to maltreat. Changes in family structure can also create stress in the family.
- **Single parents are highly represented in abuse and neglect cases:** Economic status is typically lower in single-parent families, and the single parent is at a disadvantage in trying to perform the functions of two parents.

- **Adolescent parents are at high risk because their own developmental growth has been disrupted:** They may be ill prepared to respond to the needs of the child because their own needs have not been met.
- **Punishment-centered child-rearing styles** have greater risk of promoting abuse.
- **Scapegoating** of a particular child will tend to give the family permission to see that child as the “bad” one.
- **Adoptions:** Children adopted late in childhood, children who have special needs, children with a temperamental mismatch, or children not given a culturally responsible placement.

TRIGGERING SITUATIONS

Any of the factors above can contribute to a situation in which an abusive event occurs.

There has been no systematic study of what happens to trigger abusive events.

Some instances are acute, happen very quickly, and end suddenly. Other cases are of long duration.

Examples of possible triggering situations include:

- A baby will not stop crying.
- A parent is frustrated with toilet training.
- An alcoholic is fired from a job.
- A mother, after being beaten by her partner, cannot make contact with her own family.
- A parent is served an eviction notice.
- A prescription drug used to control mental illness is stopped.
- Law enforcement is called to the home in a domestic violence situation, whether by the victim or a neighbor.
- A parent who was disrespected in the adult world later takes it out on the child.